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God, Creatures, and Neoplatonism in Leibniz

This paper brings together some aspects of the Neoplatonic inheritance in Leibniz's thought which I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere.¹ I will try to show that key elements of Leibniz's understanding of God and his relationship to creatures are illuminated by placing them in a broadly Platonic and Neoplatonic tradition.

This was, of course, a heavily theologized and Christianized tradition, enriched by contributions from other philosophical approaches, and reshaped by Leibniz into a strikingly original metaphysical system. Moreover, Leibniz was walking a well-trodden path in his attempt to offer a metaphysics of the relationship between God and creatures compatible with Christian revelation, by availing himself of some Platonic -- and (for the purpose of this paper) more specifically Neoplatonic -- metaphysical intuitions. Indeed, he could claim as predecessors authors of indisputable Christian pedigree as Augustine and Aquinas. Yet, as always, Leibniz had his own ideas on how to use the conceptual tools of Platonism and Neoplatonism in forging a satisfactory philosophical account which would, by his own light, cohere with, and even support, the key tenets of Christianity. Despite his customary caution in avoiding open criticism of established theological authorities, he developed his own original brand of Christian Platonism and Neoplatonism, parting ways at crucial junctures with Augustine and Aquinas.

This paper will briefly point at some features of Leibniz's reworking of this tradition with respect to his theory of the divine infinite, his conception of primary matter, and his introduction of the notion of metaphysical evil. I will argue that the concept of creaturely limitation, interpreted according to a Neoplatonic blueprint, plays a pivotal role in all three of these notions, providing a key which unlocks fundamental aspects of Leibniz's metaphysics.

1 The divine infinite as hypercategorematic infinite

In a dense passage of 1706 meant for his Jesuit correspondent, Bartholomew Des Bosses, Leibniz outlines four kinds of infinite: the syncategorematic infinite, the categorematic infinite, the hypercategorematic infinite, and the actual infinite.

The notions of 'syncategorematic infinite' and of 'categorematic infinite' track a well-established distinction in scholastic philosophy and in medieval logic, based on the grammatical distinction between 'categorematic' and 'syncategorematic' terms. 'Categorematic' terms, or *categorematica*, are terms such as nouns and adjectives. They fall under Aristotle's categories and have a definite independent signification (e.g. 'man', 'white'). 'Syncategorematic' terms, or *syncategorematica*, are terms which are not classifiable into any category insofar as they do not have any independent signification. As indicated by the prefix 'syn' (with / together), they acquire a signification when used in a proposition together with *categorematica*. Examples of 'syncategorematic' terms (or *consignificantia*, 'co-significative' terms) are 'and', 'or'. By the seventeenth century, the standard scholastic doctrine read the

¹ For full references and discussion see my "The Hypercategorematic Infinite", in: *The Leibniz Review* 25 (2015), pp. 5-30; "Primary Matter, Primitive Passive Power, and Creaturely Limitation in Leibniz", in: *Studia Leibnitiana* 46/2 (2014), pp. 167-186; "Metaphysical Evil Revisited", in: S. Newlands and L. Jorgensen (eds): *New Essays on Leibniz's Theodicy*, Oxford: OUP, 2014, pp. 112-134. This contribution brings together the highlights of these three papers, identifying their common theme. Additional abbreviations: LDB: *The Leibniz-Des Bosses correspondence*. Translated, edited, and with an introduction by B. C. Look and D. Rutherford. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007; LDV: *The Leibniz-De Volder Correspondence*. Translated, edited, and with an introduction by P. Lodge. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013.

Aristotelian contrast between potential and actual infinite in terms of the distinction between syncategorematic and categorematic infinite.

In line with traditional views, Leibniz rejects a categorematic infinite and accept a syncategorematic infinite. In addition, however, Leibniz introduces a third kind of infinite – the actual infinite. He thinks of this actual infinite *syncategorematically*, but firmly distinguishes it from the traditional notion of (potential) syncategorematic infinite (for which he also reserves the name of syncategorematic infinite). The actual finite endorsed by Leibniz concerns the ‘real’ as opposed to the ‘ideal’ order, and cannot, strictly speaking, be “enumerated”.² Finally, Leibniz introduces a hypercategorematic infinite which, he writes, “is God himself”:

“[...] there is a *hypercategorematic infinite*, or potestative infinite, and active power having, as it were, parts eminently but not formally or actually. This infinite is God himself.” (LDB 52-53; GP II, 314-315)

I would like to focus on this unusual notion of hypercategorematic infinite. Unlike the well-established distinction between ‘categorematic’ and ‘syncategorematic’ infinite, neither the term ‘hypercategorematic’ nor, a fortiori, its application to the infinite, was common currency. In proposing this notion, Leibniz is breaking new ground. By *hyper-categorematic* Leibniz seems to mean that which is *beyond* all *categoremata*, namely, that which is beyond any *determinate thing* falling under the Aristotelian categories and signified by categorematic terms. In other words, *hyper-categorematic* is that which is beyond any determination. It seems to me that the metaphysical mould Leibniz is using is that of the Plotinian One.

For Plotinus, the One, in its absolute simplicity and unity, is *beyond-Being*, that is, beyond any determination and differentiation. Being, or the intelligible and ordered multiplicity of the Forms, is generated by Intellect in its attempt to know the One. The Forms together constitute a kind of image of the One, and at the same time constitute the essential activity of Intellect. The key idea appears to be that the One, while beyond any determination, may be conceived of (albeit inadequately) as embracing all possible determinations.

In a note of 1695 to a series of extracts from William Twisse, *Dissertatio de Scientia Media* (Arnhem 1639), Leibniz strikes a remarkably Neoplatonic chord in describing the divine intellect as representatively grasping what in the divine essence is contained eminently. In so doing, the divine intellect represents also the imperfections and limitations of things, whereas the divine essence, in its absolute simplicity, is not tainted (as it were) even by the creaturely imperfection represented by the intellect in its thinking the essences of individual things. What is driving this doctrine seems to be one of the deepest insights of Neoplatonism, namely, that only what is absolutely unitary and simple can be perfect and purely positive, since *any determination is a negation*, any determinate thing is a negation of its being something else, any differentiation implies the denial of some other perfection:³

“In the divine essence, things are contained eminently; in the intellect, they are contained somewhat more widely [In essentia divina res eminenter, in intellectu aliquid amplius], indeed representatively, because in the divine intellect are represented also the imperfections or limitations of things. [...] Hence it is manifest that all things are in God [Hinc apparet quod omnia in Deo]. Indeed a creature originated from whatever perfection can constitute something complete while excluding another perfection. Complete perfection is that which involves all that can coexist.” (Grua 355-356)

² Leibniz to Des Bosses, 11 March 1706 (LDB 31-33): “Arguments against an actual infinity assume that, with this allowed, there exists an infinite number, likewise, that all infinities are equal. But it must be recognized that an infinite aggregate is in fact not one whole, or endowed with magnitude, and that it cannot be enumerated.”

³ Inspired by Spinoza’s remark that “determination is negation”, Hegel developed this insight into a full metaphysical system.

In the passage of 1706 for Des Bosses, Leibniz explicitly contrasts having parts “eminently” with having parts “formally” or “actually”. Although the hypercategoric infinite is not only undivided but absolutely indivisible, it can be conceived as “habens quasi partes, eminenter, non formaliter seu actu.” An absolute lack of composition which is nevertheless compatible with having parts *eminenti ratione* seems to be for Leibniz the hallmark of “real” or genuine infinity in its full metaphysical rigour. As Leibniz writes in a letter of 7 June 1698 to Johann Bernoulli: “the real infinite is perhaps the absolute itself, which is not composed of parts, but comprehends having parts eminently [eminenti ratione] and as though perfectly” (GM III/2, 500).

It appears to be important for Leibniz to stress that the being beyond every determination or every division of the hyper-categoric infinite contains eminently the richness of *all* determinations. The Plotinian One looms large. The process of determination or ‘partition’ brought about by the divine intellect thinking determinate individual essences, manifests the hyper-categoric infinite as the ultimate ground of all beings.

Moreover, Leibniz thinks of the derivation of “finite” things from the “true infinite” or “absolute” through a process of “limitation”. Some texts indicate that he thinks of this process of limitation as an *addition*. Prima facie this may be puzzling since limited perfections could be thought of as perfections resulting from “taking away” or subtracting from a greater perfection. Leibniz tells us, however, that limiting is *adding* a limit: “the absolute is prior to the limited; and so is the unbounded prior to that which has a bound, since a bound [terminus] is a kind of addition.”⁴ Once again, a Neoplatonic framework may help us understand this way of thinking: finite things result from the *addition* of a determination (being this or that thing; having this or that degree of this or that quality). Any ‘added’ determination, however, is of course also a limit or a negation. In a text of April 1676, belonging to the collection known as *De Summa Rerum*, Leibniz offers a striking understanding of “absolute” as that which lacks any “determining addition”: “to which existence is attributed absolutely, that is, without a determining addition [sine additione determinante]”. (A VI, 3, 520)

Interestingly, in his *Notes on Twisse*, Leibniz characterizes the representative activity of the divine intellect as somewhat adding (“aliquid amplius”) to the purely eminent presence of all things in the divine essence, insofar as the intellect represents also what is not formally present in the divine essence, namely the imperfection of things. A conception of the divine essence as hyper-categoric, and its distinction from the divine intellect, could be seen as an attempt to address the problem of how the divine nature can preserve, as it were, its pure positivity while embracing what necessarily implies negation and limitation.

This leads us to a family of senses in which “absolute” means, roughly, “unqualified” or, to use a more directly Neoplatonic notion, being beyond all determinations. More specifically, as noted by R. M. Adams, a “determining addition” might be a condition, hence suggesting an understanding of “absolute” as “unconditioned”; or might be a limit, hence suggesting an understanding of “absolute” as “unlimited”.⁵

Finally, let us turn to Leibniz’s rather puzzling view that creatures are (in more than one sense) *infinite*. I would like to focus here on a sense of infinity that applies to creatures which *does not* imply division or divisibility since it concerns simple substances or monads. According to Leibniz, created substances or created monads enjoy many of the features that are characteristic of the “true infinite”: strict unity, indivisibility, active power. Most importantly for the matter at hand, they are also said to be, like God, “infinite”:

⁴ *Numeri Infiniti*, A VI, 3, 502 (trans. by R. T. W. Arthur).

⁵ R. M. Adams: *Leibniz: Determinist, Theist, Idealist*, Oxford: OUP, 1994, p. 115, where other supporting texts are listed.

“I don’t know whether it is possible to explain the constitution of the soul better than by saying 1) that it is a simple substance, that is, what I call a true unity; ... 4) that the soul is an imitation of God as much as is possible to creatures; that it is, like Him, simple and yet also infinite, and envelops all through confused perceptions, but is limited as regards distinct perceptions. Whereas everything is distinct for the sovereign substance, from which everything emanates, and which is the cause of existence and of order, and in a word, is the ultimate reason of things. God contains the universe eminently, and the soul or the unity contains it virtually, being a central mirror, but active and vital, so to speak.” (Leibniz to Pierre Bayle, c. 1702; GP III, 72)

The difference between God and created substances ultimately reduces to one (but, to Leibniz’s mind, crucial) difference: unlimited versus limited perfection. Ultimately, the ontological distinction between God and creatures is based on what Leibniz regards as the strict incompatibility between God and any negation or limitation.⁶ Creatures, as determinate beings which, as such, are certain things but not others, have certain qualities in a certain degree but not others,⁷ necessarily imply limitation and negation of perfections which in God can only be purely positive. Hence, there must be ontologically distinct subjects of inherence of limited versus unlimited perfections.

Interestingly, in this letter to Bayle, the scholastic distinction between *eminenter* and *virtualiter* is pressed into service alongside a Neoplatonic-sounding notion of “emanation”. The universe is contained in God eminently but (I would like to add) not formally since this would introduce negation and limitation in God.

To conclude, Leibniz draws a fine line between being ‘limited’ and being ‘finite’. Strictly speaking, creatures for him are *limited* rather than *finite* since, through its confused perceptions, each individual substance involves the infinite. The crucial feature which seems to keep created substances from matching the “absolute infinity” of God is not, after all, indivisibility or simplicity but the lack of pure positivity which comes with any limitation.⁸ Only a being *beyond all determinations* but *eminently embracing all determinations* – or, as at one point Leibniz puts it, the hyper-categorematic infinite -- can enjoy the pure positivity of what is truly infinite while constituting the ontological grounding of all things (*omnia*). Leibniz seems to need some version of the Neoplatonic One, and of the distinction between One and Intellect, in order to protect the pure positivity of the divine essence. In so doing, he finds also a way to distinguish God and creatures, and (narrowly) escape pantheism. Insofar as the divine essence cannot formally contain any limited perfection, limited perfections require distinct substances as their bearers. The lack of any negation, and hence limitation, is what, ultimately, distinguishes the divine nature from the nature of created things.

2 Primary matter

The limitation of creatures qua creatures, interpreted according to a Neoplatonic framework, is also at heart of Leibniz’s conception of primary matter. I will argue that Leibniz’s considerate view is that primary matter is *not* a positive constituent which must be added to the form in order to have a substance. Primary matter is merely a way to express the negation of some further perfection. It does not have a positive ontological status and merely indicates the limitation or imperfection of a substance. To be sure, Leibniz is less than explicit on this point, and in many texts he writes as if primary matter were a positive constituent of a substance. It seems to me, however, that the view most in keeping with the thrust of his mature philosophical system is that captured by a striking remark in the *Notes on Twisse* that we have already

⁶ I follow here the interpretation proposed by Adams: *Leibniz*, pp. 123-134, of how Leibniz avoids a Spinozistic conception of God.

⁷ Cf. A VI, 3, 512 (15 April 1676; in *De Summa Rerum*): “and thus things differ from God, who is everything. Creatures are some things.”

⁸ I note that the issue of the pure positivity of God is central to Leibniz’s version of the ontological argument.

encountered above: “Materia rerum est nihilum: id est limitatio [The matter of things is nothing: that is, limitation].”⁹ This becomes especially apparent in texts showing that Leibniz’s conception of primary matter corresponds to his conception of creaturely limitation.

Let us start from the *Specimen Dynamicum* of 1695, where Leibniz writes that “the primitive force of being acted upon [vis primitiva patiendi] or of resisting constitutes that which is called *primary matter* in the schools, if correctly interpreted.”¹⁰ To which Scholastic doctrines regarding primary matter is Leibniz’s referring? And which one of the Scholastics’ quite radically diverging views on primary matter, if any, does Leibniz regard as the “correct interpretation”?

Leibniz is certainly closer to Aquinas’s view that matter is pure potentiality and, as such, cannot exist without one form or another inhering in it, than to the later Scholastics, who see matter as a positive ontological principle with an actuality of its own and capable of existing without any substantial form inhering in it. Yet he is much more radical than Aquinas. As Scotus and Ockham had pointed out, conceiving primary matter as pure potentiality leads to the identification of primary matter with non-being. Leibniz does not recoil from such conclusion and, either deny that primary matter is pure potentiality (as Scotus and Ockham had done) or, deny that pure potentiality is mere non-being (as Aquinas had done). Instead, his considered position is in line with the conclusion that primary matter, being pure potentially, is non-being. In short, in my view, Leibniz moves away from an Aristotelian framework of primary substances as composites of two positive ontological constituents, form and matter, of which matter is the ultimate subject of inherence, toward a more frankly Neoplatonic (or more precisely Plotinian) framework in which matter is identified with non-being. (It should be noted that Plotinus identifies therefore matter with evil. As it will appear, this Plotinian claim is not without resonances in Leibniz’s notion of metaphysical evil.)

In order to indicate this original imperfection or limitation of creatures, Leibniz uses a distinctive image inspired by his studies in physics: “the original limitation of creatures” is like the “natural inertia of bodies”, that is, the natural resistance of bodies to motion. Such resistance is not an action or an active power of bodies but a passivity or lack of receptivity of the active motive force resulting in a “privation of speed”. This notion is developed in three key texts: paragraph 30 of the *Theodicy* (GP VI, 119-121); the “Abregé de la Controverse reduite à des Argumens en forme” (GP VI, 383), and paragraphs 69-73 of the *Causa Dei* (GP VI, 449-450).

These texts indicate that inertia or resistance to motion is not only the result in bodies of the primitive passivity which characterizes any created substance. This primitive passivity is in turn the expression of the original imperfection and limitation of creatures. In the passage from the *Theodicy*, there is an explicit indication that we are dealing here with more than an analogy. Inertia in bodies is not just “a perfect image” used to signify creaturely limitation. It is a *sample* (“un echantillon”) of the results that creaturely limitation has in bodies. Likewise, in a note by Leibniz to paragraph 42 of the *Monadology*, the original imperfection of creatures is not merely presented as something analogous or comparable to the natural inertia of bodies but as something which is *manifested* in the natural inertia of bodies (“This *original imperfection* of creatures is noticeable [se remarque] in the *natural inertia* of bodies” GP VI, 613). Inertia and resistance are derivative features in bodies of the primitive passivity which is an aspect of all created substances due to the necessary imperfection and limitation of creatures qua creatures. I would therefore venture to say that Leibniz’s notion of primary matter is, at bottom, nothing else than his notion of creaturely limitation. For Leibniz the notion of primary

⁹ *Extraits de Twisse*, c. 1695 (Grua, 355-356): “Being posited or actuality, and restriction or the privative are in beings like metaphysical form and metaphysical matter [Positio vel actus, et restrictio vel privativo se habent in entibus ut forma metaphysica et materia metaphysica]. And thus the matter of things is nothing [est nihilum]: that is, limitation; [their] form is perfection.”

¹⁰ GM VI, 236-7 (trans. by R. Ariew and D. Garber).

matter expresses the fact that creatures qua limited and imperfect beings have an intrinsic passivity, from which features of bodies such as impenetrability, resistance and inertia ultimately result.

In sum, primary matter or primitive passive power, as corresponding to creaturely limitation, is not a ‘something’, a positive ontological constituent added to form to make a substance, but merely a way to indicate that creatures *lack* further perfection, that is, a way to indicate that there are degrees of active power or activity which creatures *do not* have. On some occasions, Leibniz uses the Greek word *dynamikon* (dynamism) to refer to a single dynamic principle “from which there is action and passion” (LDV 240-1; LDV 72-73; GP IV, 394). This single principle of activity and passivity suggests only one real constituent of a simple substance – a *limited* principle of change, which accounts for both the active and passive features of substances, that is, their acting and being acted upon.

This also helps explaining why Leibniz from 1695 onwards comes to think of *simplicity* as the single property which best captures what it is, in metaphysical rigour, to be a substance. As Aquinas had maintained, something that is one *per se* (as a substance must be in order to qualify as such) cannot have more than one constituent that has an actuality of its own. Hence, for Aquinas, matter in composite substances is pure potentiality which receives all its actuality from form. Scotus challenged such a position, pointing out that it is inconsistent to think of primary matter as not having an actuality of its own and yet being a constituent of a composite. If it is pure potentiality, it is non-being and, as a result, there is no such thing as a *composite* of two positive ontological constituents.

It seems to me that Leibniz pushes these thoughts to their extreme consequences. He maintains, like Aquinas, that an entity one *per se* can have only one constituent which has an actuality of its own – the form, or entelechy, or active power. But unlike Aquinas, and in line with Scotus’s objection, he concludes that, if the other so-called constituent, matter, does not have an actuality of its own, it can only be non-being. If this is the case, then any entity which is one *per se* is *not* and *cannot be* a composite being. Any entity which strictly qualifies as one *per se*, and therefore as a substance, is a simple being.

Scotus had already noted that, if matter were not a positive principle, there would be no composite substances but only simple substances. But since composition is needed to explain generation and corruption, as Scotus maintained, matter is a positive principle and there are composite substances. This reasoning resonates in a striking way in the *Monadology*, but turned up-side-down: matter is not a positive principle; therefore there are, ultimately, only simple substances, which as such cannot be generated or corrupted: “there is no conceivable manner in which a simple substance could naturally perish. For the same reason there is no manner in which a simple substance could begin naturally, since it could not be formed through composition.” (*Monadology*, §§ 4-5; GP VI, 605) These simple substances are metaphysically primitive due to the absence of any dependence on parts or constituents which could be regarded as prior to the whole. In the program of ontological minimalism pursued by Leibniz, this is exactly what he had been looking for – the metaphysically primitive level of being to which everything else can be reduced.

3 Metaphysical evil

The other coin of the medal of Leibniz’s conception of primary matter as creaturely limitation, is his introduction of the controversial notion of metaphysical evil. In the *Theodicy* Leibniz famously distinguishes three kinds of evil: “*Metaphysical* evil consists in simple imperfection, *physical* evil in suffering and *moral* evil in sin.” (GP VI, 115) The natural interpretation of the notion of metaphysical evil presented in this passage is suggested by what Leibniz says about imperfection in the immediately preceding paragraph (§ 20): “one must consider that there is

an *original imperfection in the creature* before sin, because the creature is essentially limited”. Yet this interpretation of metaphysical evil as the limitation of creatures qua creatures leads to all manner of difficulties which commentators have not hesitated to ascribe to Leibniz. Most importantly, metaphysical evil appears to cast a long, sinister shadow over God’s creation. It seems to imply that creatures, simply in virtue of not being gods, are in some sense intrinsically and inescapably evil, and that this partially but yet necessarily evil nature is the ultimate source of any other evil.

If we take a closer look at Leibniz’s trichotomy against the backdrop of other taxonomies of evil available to him, it becomes apparent that Leibniz was proposing something unusual. Augustine had suggested that all evil is ultimately either *malum culpae* or *malum poenae*, that is, either evil of fault (sin) or evil of penalty / punishment for sin. The *malum culpae* has the character of action; the *malum poenae* of passion. The former is evil done or evil-doing, the latter is evil suffered as a consequence of evil done. This key distinction between *malum culpae* (which is evil voluntarily done) and *malum poenae* (which is evil unwillingly suffered) constituted the backbone of the traditional taxonomy of evil.

An immediate question raised by this distinction, however, is whether it really captures every major kind of evil. Thomas Aquinas acknowledges the existence of a kind of evil which is not captured by the Augustinian distinction between fault and punishment – namely natural evil affecting creatures independently of moral responsibility. In turn, Francisco Suarez explicitly addresses the issue of natural evil, which he contrasts with the evil which affects a being insofar as (*quatenus*) this entity or agent is free. The following points should be noted about Suarez’s distinction between natural evil and moral evil: 1) natural evil is either a privation of some good (some perfection) which a certain kind of being ought to have, or something the nature of which damages or destroys another nature; 2) natural evil is the kind of evil proper to beings lacking reason but it extends also to rational beings insofar as they are considered as natural beings as opposed to beings endowed with will and freedom; 3) moral evil is proper only to free beings and only insofar as they act freely, that is, insofar as they can bear moral responsibility for their action; in this consists the difference with natural evil.

Leibniz’s categories of physical evil and moral evil mirror closely the passive and active character of the *malum poenae* and *malum culpae* as well as their link with moral responsibility. In line with Aquinas and Suarez, Leibniz thinks that it is ultimately the freedom of rational beings that makes these two kinds of evil appropriate, as it were, to them. On the other hand, metaphysical evil is seen (as in Suarez’s natural evil) as proper to non intelligent beings although it extends also to intelligent beings but not qua intelligent and free agents. Moreover, Leibniz is clear that although human beings suffer as a consequence of moral evil, often this suffering is a consequence not of their own moral evil but of that of others. Most importantly, he does not go on to suggest (as a follower of Augustine might have done) that -- due to original sin -- no human being is really innocent of moral evil and for this reason all human beings deserve the *malum poenae*. On the contrary, Leibniz is shocked and scandalized by Augustine’s view that infants who die without baptism should be condemned to eternal suffering as a punishment for original sin. He clearly rejects the view that Adam and Eve’s original sin *on its own* justifies the *malum poenae* (or, in his interpretation, physical evil) in other human beings (GP VI, 285). Leibniz suggests instead that we can be certain that this kind of suffering will be recompensed by “a greater happiness” (GP VI, 261). In brief, his claim that physical evil is the consequence of moral evil does not imply the Augustinian view that no human being who suffers is truly innocent. Even more importantly for the purposes of this paper, according to Leibniz there is also evil which is simply *not* the consequence of moral evil. This kind of evil cannot fall under the category of physical evil. It would in fact be unworthy of God’s justice to think that such evil is punishment for sin – *malum poenae* -- since it affects beings which do not bear moral responsibility.

We can draw a first conclusion regarding Leibniz's conception of metaphysical evil. One of the main reasons behind Leibniz's introduction of the category of metaphysical evil appears to be his full acknowledgment of a kind of evil which cannot be regarded as punishment for moral evil. Here we encounter the first key function of metaphysical evil for Leibniz: it accounts for the kind of evil that Aquinas and, especially, Suarez called natural evil. In turn, this allows us to reach a more accurate understanding of Leibniz's category of physical evil. Many have assumed that for Leibniz "physical evil" corresponds to the category of natural evil strangely absent from Leibniz's typology, as if "physical" had been used as a synonym of "natural". According to this common interpretation, Leibniz's physical evil occupies therefore the same conceptual space of William King's natural evil. I argue, however, that this is incorrect. The notion of physical evil is explicitly identified with the Augustinian category of evil of punishment for sin. On the other hand, the notion of natural evil as a kind of evil which is independent of moral responsibility is subsumed by Leibniz in the notion of metaphysical evil.

There is however something more to Leibniz's notion of metaphysical evil which was not included in the notion of natural evil subsumed within it. I believe that the second key function assigned by Leibniz to the category of metaphysical evil is indeed that of accounting for creaturely limitation, that is, a kind of imperfection which (as in the case of natural evil) cannot fall under the *malum culpae* and the *malum poenae*. These two types of metaphysical evil are linked by their independence from moral evil, and by the fact that one (original limitation) is the condition of possibility of the other (natural evil).

In classifying creaturely limitation as a kind of evil Leibniz is departing from the traditional line. The key point of departure is to be found, in my view, in his disregarding the distinction between *privatio* and *negatio*, that is, the distinction between perfections which are due to a certain kind of creatures but of which these creatures are deprived (e.g., in human beings, the ability to see), and perfections which a certain kind of creatures is simply not supposed to have (e.g., in human beings, the ability to fly). Why did Leibniz not endorse this traditional distinction which must have been known to him? It seems implausible that Leibniz simply confused two key concepts on which the scholastic ontology of evil rested. The fact that he tacitly abandons the distinction without criticizing it tallies instead with his habit of glossing over disagreement with canonical authorities. Rather than confusion, his unadvertised departure seems to indicate that he was all too aware of his divergence from the traditional path.

According to Leibniz, any limitation or negation is a privation of further perfections (that is, an 'imperfection'), and as a privation it is, formally, evil. Following Albert Heinekamp's lead, this point could be pushed further by locating in Leibniz's Neoplatonic emphasis on continuous degrees of being (as opposed to Aristotelian kinds of beings) the explanation of his disregarding the distinction between negations and privations. Differences amongst monads are ultimately of degree not of kind. If, ultimately, there are no kinds with specific due perfections the lack of which qualifies as a privation, then any lack of perfection, any negation of being is a privation.¹¹ One could object that precisely Leibniz's conception of individual substance as *species infima* (A VI, 4B, 553 and 1541), with the consequent elimination of a species or genus serving as standard against which to measure an individual substance's perfection, insures that each individual substance is exactly what it is supposed to be, with nothing lacking. But this objection fails insofar as *there is* a standard of perfection against which all individual substances are measured, namely God – and in comparison to God any limitation is a privation of perfection.

¹¹ See A. Heinekamp: "Zu den Begriffen realitas, perfectio und bonum metaphysicum", in: *Akten des Internationalen Leibniz-Kongresses: Hannover, 14. - 19. November 1966*, vol. 1, Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1968, pp. 207-222 and A. Heinekamp: *Das Problem des Guten bei Leibniz*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1969, esp. pp. 151-156.

I think, however, that Leibniz would agree with Augustine and the tradition in maintaining that the original limitation of creatures qua creatures should not be regarded as making creatures to some extent evil. I take this view for the following reason. Metaphysical evil, intended as this original limitation, has strictly the character of *malum in se*. That is, ontologically, it is strictly non-being. In other words, although creaturely limitation is formally evil (*malum in se*) insofar as it qualifies as an instance of non-being, it does not on its own make a creature to some degree or in some respect evil (as when, for instance, a being is considered from the point of view of *malum alteri/secundum quid*). On the other hand, this necessary limitation of creatures qua creatures makes it possible (although not necessary) that rational and free creatures will chose moral evil (*malum culpae*) thereby causing physical evil (*malum poenae*). The necessary limitation of creatures has as a consequence the *possibility* of moral and physical evil, but not its *necessity*.

The same applies to the degrees of perfection of creatures. Any lack of perfection, insofar as it is an instance of non-being, is according to Leibniz formally evil (*malum in se*). However, also in the case of the different limitations of different creatures, this does not make such creatures to some degree or in some respect evil because *malum in se* is ontologically strictly non-being. In my view, it is precisely because Leibniz fully subscribes to a Neoplatonic conception of the nature of evil as non-being that he is not afraid to categorize creaturely limitation as evil – to think that it would make creatures to some extent evil is equivalent to hypostasizing non-being, no matter how unintended such hypostatization might be.

In conclusion, Leibniz's concept of creaturely limitation, conceived in a (Christianized) Neoplatonic framework as negation of the absolute positivity and perfection proper only to God, is a notion which shapes some of the most fundamental features of his metaphysics, namely, his views on God's relationship to creatures (including, notably, the rejection of pantheism), his conception of matter at its most basic metaphysical level, and his conception of evil.